



## On the classification of Images of a Thracian horseman

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DOI: 10:cshs/763

### **Abstract.**

During the early modern period ancient myths, like that of king Midas, began to take on a specifically modern resonance as they were used to allegorise the European quest for gold in the Americas. Lyly's play uses the myth to present a political allegory of Philip of Spain, by giving Midas and his courtiers what was considered by a contemporary English audience to be a specifically Spanish characteristic: the desire for gold.



Midas asks his three counsellors, Eristus, Martius and Mellacrites, what he should ask for as his reward from Bacchus. Mellacrites, whose name suggests both sweetness and judgement, recommends the golden touch.

**Keywords:** England, Spanish, myth,

Lyly's *Midas*, written in 1589 to celebrate the defeat of the Armada in the previous year, was first performed as part of the Queen's Christmas revels on Twelfth Night, 1590. [1] Ostensibly, the play presents Philip of Spain as the foolish Midas and the ruler of Lesbos, who narrowly escapes an invasion attempt by the Phrygian king, as a flattering equivalent for Elizabeth; David Bevington argues that "Midas unambiguously praises England's queen as the archetypal opposite of Midas and Philip." [2] In this paper, however, I would like to argue that the play's representation of Elizabeth as the ruler of Lesbos and its treatment of gold as the marker of imperial success reveal a sceptical view of England's claims to empire. I hope to show that the play far from offering a simplified vision of the political scene post 1588, in fact offers a complex set of responses to Anglo-Hispanic relations, and particularly to those legitimating discourses used to advance the ideology of empire.

Lyly's source for *Midas* was Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and, like Ovid's account, the play is made up of two stories about Midas. The first deals with the familiar myth of the king's golden touch. The second details Midas's punishment by Apollo for preferring the music of Pan. Here, the hapless king is given ass's ears and his attempts to conceal this are thwarted when his barber, unable to keep the secret, whispers it into a hole in the ground. Reeds immediately spring up from the hole and carry the story to all who pass by. [3]

The myth of *Midas* has traditionally been used as an allegory of a tyrannical ruler, who, without a proper system of government and advice, makes foolish decisions. [4] The Midas myth also belongs to the group of stories characterized by their use of gold as the means of both reward and punishment. Ovid's account describes how Midas chooses the golden

touch as his reward from Bacchus for reuniting the god with his former tutor Silenus. The king is consequently faced with starvation and has to relinquish his reward.

He argues that gold can bring Midas the success he needs in the fields of love and war: "is it not gold that maketh the chastest to yield to lust." [6] And more tellingly, "By gold may you shake the courts of other princes" (I.1.49-50). In Act II, scene i, the desire for gold is discussed in terms evocative of the gold mines of the Americas as the "utmost parts of the west, where all the guts of the earth are gold" (II.2.110-111). The play suggests that gold from the New World not only serves as the marker of Spanish imperial success, but enables Philip to finance wars of conquest in Europe as well. A contemporary audience might well here have thought of Spain's involvement in the Netherlands, a war funded by wealth from the Americas. Midas's speech in Act III, scene i, is central to the play's political allegory, as he reflects on his career of imperial aggression and greed. The gold granted by Bacchus to Midas in the myth is presented in the play as a cautionary tale about empire and how such benefits can backfire on an overreaching monarch. The speech catalogues a series of charges against Philip of Spain, which a contemporary audience would no doubt have recognised, if not with reference to specific incidents, then as a more general confirmation of their suspicions. When Midas considers where his ambitions have led him his remark "why did I covet so many crowns having myself but one head?" (15-16) would remind the audience of Philip's imperial ambitions in Europe as well as the New World. At this time Philip controlled areas of the Americas, Africa and Asia, as well as ruling Spain, Portugal, Naples, Sicily, Milan, the Netherlands and parts of France. [7] And Midas is also concerned with conquering those "petty islands near to Phrygia" (I.1.118), reminding the English audience of their lucky escape from invasion in 1588.

In this speech Midas also acknowledges the defeat of his designs upon Lesbos: "Have not I made the sea to groan under the number of my ships,



and have they not perished, that there was not two left to make a number" (III.1.33-35). This clearly refers to the defeat of the Armada. England, like Lesbos, is an island "walled with huge waves" (III.1.59-60), pointing to the providential weather which blew the Armada off course. Martius's lament "I see all his expeditions for wars are laid in water" (IV.4.10-11) draws attention to Philip's international embarrassment over the collapse of his invasion plan and the absence of a back-up plan. The failure of his plan is complete when, in order to rid himself of the ass's ears, the oracle reveals that "Unless he shrink his stretching hand from Lesbos / His ears at length shall reach to Delphos" (V.3.29-30). Midas concedes that the ruler of Lesbos is no "petty prince" but "a prince protected by the gods, by nature, by his own virtue, and his subjects' obedience" (III.1.56-58) and is "through the world a wonder, for wisdom and temperance" (61-62). This description is designed to flatter Elizabeth, as Bevington points out, as even Philip of Spain is forced to acknowledge her qualities as a ruler. Midas's daughter Sophronia provides another female equivalent for Elizabeth, displaying similar virtues and offering another positive image of female in an influential position, as she alone offers her father proper counsel.

The ruler of Lesbos is never named, but is referred to simply as "he" or by the title of king or prince. These titles, however, could be used to refer to either a male or female sovereign, with Elizabeth herself making use of them. Indeed these appellations for the ruler of Lesbos may have confirmed the connection with Elizabeth as monarch of England, by her use of them in her famous Tilbury speech: "I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a King and a King of England too and think it foul scorn that Parma or Spain or any prince of Europe should dare to invade the borders of my realm." [8] Thus the image of a monarch defending their kingdom against invasion is one very much in tune with the Armada celebrations, when Elizabeth deliberately draws upon her self-styled role, which combined both masculine and feminine qualities. [9]

Lyly's choice of Lesbos as an island equivalent for England, however, actually problematises Elizabeth's position as a female ruler. Firstly, Lesbos invites comparison between Elizabeth and Sappho. This appears to compliment Elizabeth, as Sappho was famous not only for her wisdom, but her rejection of eros. However, Lyly's use of Sappho as a strategy for flattery is ambiguous. In his earlier play *Sappho and Phao*, Lyly has Sappho outwit Venus by entering, rather unusually, into an alliance with Cupid to become "on earth the goddess of affection." [10] This vision of Sappho certainly appears to run counter to her traditional image. Lyly, however, like his contemporaries was aware that there were several dominant accounts of the historical Sappho. Abraham Fleming, one of Lyly's sources, describes her as one whom Plato "numbreth among such as were wise lerned and skilful." [11] He is also aware of other stories, which describe her as "a strong whore and an arrant strumpet." [12] Sappho then offers the terrifying image of female sexual appetite. In *Midas* the implied analogy between Sappho and Elizabeth raises a double negative, as Sappho underlines not only Elizabeth's own rejection of marriage and the consequent succession crisis, but also the image of a female monarch governed by her emotions. Whilst the play appears to reinforce those reassuring images of England ruled by a wise and inviolable queen, Lyly's Lesbos in fact suggests an England that is far from stable.

The play as a political allegory, then, ostensibly presents the triumph of Lesbos over Phrygia in terms of England's defeat of the Armada. The struggle between Lesbos and Phrygia, however, offers a far more subtle exploration of English national identity than might first appear, particularly when considered in terms of the *translatio imperii*.

Midas's kingdom of Phrygia is located in modern day Turkey, but it had particular cultural significance in Renaissance literature as the site of the ancient city of Troy. In various accounts of the founding of Troy, Troy is described as a Phrygian city. One story describes how Ilus was rewarded for his victory at the games in Phrygia with a dappled cow. The king advised



Ilus to build a city wherever the cow first lay down. Ilus did so and called the city Ilium after himself. [13] David Bevington notes in the Arden edition of *Troilus and Cressida* that Phrygia was "used as a poetic equivalent for Troy in Roman and renaissance poetry." [14] The prologue of the play also identifies Phrygia with Troy, as the Trojan soldier describes how the Greeks have "Put forth toward Phrygia, and their vow is made / To ransack Troy." [15]

The idea of *translatio imperii* became vital in the last quarter of the sixteenth century, as it helped justify English claims to empire, at a time when they were failing to keep up with their imperial rival Spain. Margo Hendricks emphasises the ideological importance of the claim when she remarks that "sixteenth century England had neither an indigenous imperial history to draw upon (as did for example, the French with Charlemagne or the Italians with the Romans) nor an existing hegemonic history (as Spain did with its control of its extensive territories outside its geographic boundaries to proclaim itself an empire." [16] Hendricks goes on to argue that the Trojan myth of descent was part of England's attempt at "reinvention" as it attempted to create an identity worthy of its position on the world stage and of its opponents. [17] To strengthen the claims, London was often referred to as Troynovant, the new Troy, thus following in the footsteps of Brutus and Aeneas.

The manipulation of the *translatio* myth is illustrated through the examination of one the Sieve portraits of Elizabeth, painted probably between 1579 and 1590. [18] The painting presents Elizabeth holding the sieve of Tuccia, the Vestal virgin. What is significant about this portrait is the sequence of ten miniatures on the column behind Elizabeth. The first is of an imperial crown and the rest outline the story of Dido and Aeneas. The importance of this story for Elizabeth, as direct descendant of Aeneas, is that they have both, in their own way, resisted succumbing to love. Aeneas and Elizabeth are then both free, as Yates puts it, to wear "the imperial crown of pure empire." [19]

In view of the significance of Lesbos and Phrygia for Elizabeth and England, I would argue that Lyly's *Midas* offers a critique of Elizabeth's mythos, not only as Virgin Queen, but also as successor to the imperial crown. For example, both Aeneas and the ruler of Lesbos are reliant upon the intervention of the gods to save them from disaster. Aeneas is brought by Venus, his mother, to Carthage and she ensures that Dido will help prepare his men and ships for their subsequent journey to Rome. The prince of Lesbos is similarly reliant upon the gods' decision to restore Midas's ears only if he will give up his invasion plans for Lesbos. On the one hand, the ruler of Lesbos has all the attributes of kingship which Midas lacks, and represents the moral high ground of the play, yet on the other (s)he appears passive in defence of the island, remaining off stage. Midas, however, despite his humiliating punishment and lack of judgement is an extremely dynamic character and, like Tamburlaine, offers an attractive and successful model for imperial expansion. In spite of having to renounce his plans to conquer Lesbos and his claims in the west, his power in the final scene of the play is not significantly reduced and we are not left with a sense that he has been defeated.

In his examination of the two rulers, Lyly returns to the same issues explored by Marlowe in *Dido, Queen of Carthage*, where Marlowe deliberately chooses to emphasise aspects of Aeneas's personality that are not particularly noble or heroic, in order to question England's claims to empire. [20] Marlowe, in his depiction of Aeneas, deliberately chooses to emphasise his selfish streak when describing how he leaves his wife and several sisters behind in Troy. This departure is recalled when he leaves Carthage. I would suggest that the myth of Aeneas as the noble Trojan hero and Elizabeth's ancestor as the foundation stone of imperial ideology is held up to scrutiny by both Marlowe and Lyly and is found wanting. In this way both *Midas* and *Dido* appear to articulate frustration with Elizabeth's cult of virginity and the Tudor myth of Troy, particularly as the queen began to get older.



*Midas*, then, raises some very interesting ideas about the *translatio imperii* if Phrygia denotes imperial Spain, whilst simultaneously symbolising the Trojan origins of the English drive for power. The play thus presents the Spanish as offering a more immediate example of how to achieve imperial status, rather than relying upon the myths of the past. In this way Phrygia acts as a two-way mirror for the audience: it presents a reflection of the English self, yet looking back at the audience is the image of the Spanish Other. It is a site of liminality where the ancient myth of Troy, birthplace of England's ancestors, clashes with the modern, as Phrygia in Lyly's play comes to stand for imperial Spain, the apparently true heirs of empire. The kingdom of Phrygia in the play is a place of ungovernable appetites where gold and empire defy measurement. Its significance as a place of excess is underlined by the double meaning of its other name Troy, which is also a term for a system of weights and measures for precious metals and stones. [21] This added connection between Troy and excess suggests that the lust for gold and empire is shared equally by England and Spain.

In the second half of this essay I will suggest that the play places emphasis not upon the conflict between England and Spain, as the play's surface allegory suggests, but the influence of gold upon those conquistadors and privateers who go to the Americas in search of it. In this way the play offers a critique of gold and its corrupting influence, suggesting once again that the thirst for gold is a disease that affects Spanish and English alike.

Midas's choice of the golden touch as his reward is just one of the ways in which the desire for gold and ultimately empire is figured as an unnatural appetite. Gold is presented as both tantalising and grotesque in the way that it physically affects Midas. Celia, one of the ladies of the court, warns Eristus that had he been as successful in his wish for love as Midas had been with his for gold, it would now be as loathsome to him as "gold is to his eyes, and make thy heart pinch with melancholy as his guts do



with famine" (II.1.5-7). Mellacrites reports that Midas's "meat turneth to massy gold in his mouth, and his wine slideth down his throat like liquid gold" (II.i.51-53). Midas is faced with starvation, as he cannot eat gold; he tells his counsellors, "My lords, I faint both for lack of food and want of grace. I will to the river, where if I be rid of this intolerable disease of gold, I will shake off that intemperate desire of government, and measure my territories, not by the greatness of my mind, but the right of my succession." [22]

*Midas*, whilst clearly alluding to Philip II, is in some ways more closely concerned with the story of another Spaniard, the conquistador Baldivia. Baldivia was captured by the Indians of Chile and feasted by them and "the last service of all was a cuppe full of melted gold, which the Indians forced him to drinke, saying, Now glut thy selfe with gold, and so they killed him." [23] The story of this modern day Midas was brought back to England in 1587 by George Clifford, the Earl of Cumberland. In 1586, Cumberland had financed a ship to sail to the Americas. On the river Plate the crew met the Portuguese, Lopez Vaz, chronicler of conquistadors such as Lopez de Aguirre, who told them the story of Baldivia. The ship returned to England in September 1587 with the story and it was printed in Hakluyt's *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries* in 1589. [24] Lyly, with his connections at court, was most likely aware of the story. Theodor de Bry, the Flemish engraver, published a series of illustrations during the 1590s, one of which was entitled "The Spanish thirst for gold quenched" in which a Spanish captive has molten gold poured down his throat.

Baldivia's story not only gives the myth of Midas a modern resonance, it also points to another golden myth that was gaining currency during the 1580s, the myth of El Dorado. There are certain points of comparison between the two myths that are suggestive. Both stories are concerned with a golden man. The myth of El Dorado grew out of stories about the rituals of an Andean tribe, whose chief was anointed with gold dust - hence the name El Dorado, or golden man. The story tells how this Indian chief would



then be taken to the centre of a sacred lake to make offerings of gold, which were then deposited in the lake. The legendary city of El Dorado belonged to this chief, so that as the myth developed El Dorado came to stand for the place rather than the person. [26] Similarly, Midas becomes a golden man and in Lyly's story, even his beard turns to gold. To cleanse himself of his golden touch, Midas is forced to bathe in the river Pactolus: "he no sooner bathed his limbs in the river but it turn'd into a golden stream, the sands to fine gold, and all to gold that was cast into the water" (III.iii.90-92).

By 1589, when Lyly was writing *Midas*, El Dorado would have been big news. English interest in the golden city centres around intelligence recently gathered by Sir Walter Raleigh from Spanish sources. In 1586 several of Raleigh's ships captured a Spanish ship on its return from the Americas to Spain. The ship did not contain gold or treasure but Don Pedro de Sarmiento de Gamboa, a conquistador and governor of a Spanish colony in Patagonia. Sarmiento was brought to England in the hope that he could be ransomed. Sarmiento was an expert on Inca culture and had been involved himself in the search for lake Paititi, the golden lake of El Dorado fame. When he reached England he was met and entertained by Raleigh. It is from his conversations with Sarmiento that Raleigh begins to establish a location for El Dorado in Guiana, where he would travel in 1595. [27]

Lyly probably knew Raleigh through his patron, the Earl of Oxford. During the period 1582-83 Raleigh, at the request of Lord Burghley, Oxford's father-in-law helped restore Oxford to the queen's favour after a duel with Thomas Knyvet. [28] Lyly as Oxford's secretary would almost certainly have been aware of Raleigh's involvement with Oxford.

At this time Raleigh's interest in colonialism was well known; the year after his dealings with Oxford he was granted the patent for discovering and planting America. By 1587 Raleigh is encouraged to emulate the Spanish conquistadors. In his "Epistle Dedicatory to Sir Walter Raleigh" prefacing his republication of Peter Martyr's *Decades of the newe world* in 1584,

Hakluyt encourages Raleigh to model himself on the conquistador Ferdinand Cortes.

Go on, I say, follow the path on which you have already set foot, seize Fortune's lucky jowl, spurn not the immortal fame which is here offered you, but let the doughty deeds of Ferdinand Cortes, the Castilian, the stout conqueror of New Spain, here beautifully described, resound ever in your ears [29]

The parallels between the story of Midas and Baldivia are used not only to highlight Spanish cruelty, but also serve as a warning to those adventurers such as Raleigh that, in using the Spanish conquistadors as role models, they reveal that their motivations are in fact identical. In this way the differences between the English self and the Spanish Other begin to evaporate.

In *Midas* Lyly continues his critique of English imperialism through his inclusion of references to Marlowe's conquering machine Tamburlaine. There are a number of reasons why Lyly may have chosen to allude to Tamburlaine. Michael Pincombe suggests that Lyly's return to the theatre in 1587 was prompted by financial considerations. [30] This certainly may have been an added pressure for a successful play and allusions to Marlowe's smash hit, together with a Tamburlaine-style protagonist, may have been economically motivated. A more convincing reading is that both Lyly in *Midas* and Marlowe in *Tamburlaine* are concerned with the themes of empire and national identity, particularly the way in which the boundaries of difference can be blurred, with specific reference to the relationship between English privateers and Spanish conquistadors.

Tamburlaine is referred to frequently as "the scourge of the earth," a title which, Thomas Cartelli notes, Marlowe may well have taken from Hakluyt's *Discourse of Western Planting*, written in 1584, in which Hakluyt describes imperial Spain as "the scourge of the worlde." [31] Midas uses Tamburlainian imagery to describe how he will wish for gold and thus be "monarch of the world, the darer of fortune" (l.2.124-125). This imagery is



repeated by Martius, who reveals that he "would wish to be monarch of the world, conquering kingdoms like villages, and being greatest on earth, be commander of the whole earth....wringing out of every country tribute" (I.1.30-34). Later, when Midas regrets his attempts to take over the world, he admits that "Conquests are great thefts" (III.1.83), to which Martius retorts, "fain would I see him that durst call a conqueror a thief" (III.1.85-86). These images are suggestive of the description of Tamburlaine by Meander, a Persian lord in the opening scene of the play, who labels him a "sturdy Scythian thief" who "commits incivil outrages, / Hoping...../To reign in Asia, and with barbarous arms/To make himself the monarch of the East." [32]

Lyly continues to allude to Tamburlaine as he figures Midas's drive for world domination as an unnatural appetite. In Act III, scene I, Midas compares his pursuit of power with the appetites of the horses of King Diomedes, who were fed on human flesh. In this instance pamper suggests the figurative meaning of the verb, to feed luxuriously, as Midas has over-indulged or "fed" his appetite for conquest: "Thou hast pamper'd up thyself with slaughter, as Diomedes did his horse with blood, so insatiable thy thirst, so heavy thy sword" (III.1.20-22). His lines here deliberately echo Tamburlaine's famous line "Holla ye pamper'd jades of Asia!" which marks the opening of the scene in which Tamburlaine enters the stage in a chariot drawn by the kings of Trebizond and Soria (IV.iii.i). In the speech that follows, Tamburlaine draws on the myth of Diomedes and his horses, which were eventually tamed by Hercules to describe his victory over the two hapless kings who now draw his chariot. Tamburlaine, although he identifies himself with Hercules, also seeks to replicate the role of Diomedes, as he wants to make the tamed horses cruel again and resume their original appetite:

It is as though, having been tamed or defeated, the horses and, in turn, his captives hold no interest for him. To be tame is not to be worthy of Tamburlaine, so they must be made vicious again, undoing the work of

Hercules and resorting to the methods of Diomedes. Tamburlaine's treatment of the kings is cyclical, as no sooner have the kings been tamed and their spirits broken than Tamburlaine wants to reignite a desire to rebel so that he can conquer them again. This denial of closure on Tamburlaine's part reflects at once both his consuming need for opponents and countries to conquer and yet the failure to be satisfied by his successes. [34] Midas is also consumed by the need for conquest; he reflects on his numerous territories, but cannot rest until he has invaded the island of Lesbos:

When I call to mind my cruelties in Lycaonia, my usurping in Gaetulia, my oppression in Sola, then do I find neither mercies in my conquests nor colour for my wars nor measure in my taxes.....a bridge of gold did I mean to make in that island where all my navy could not make a breach. Those islands did I long to touch, that I might turn them to gold. (III.1 26-29, 49-52)

The relationship between Tamburlaine's unnatural diet and vicious temperament would perhaps serve to underline his Scythian origins. Writers such as Edmund Spenser, who claimed that the native Irish were descended from the Scythians, had recorded the bloodthirsty reputation of the Scythians. The Irish had therefore inherited the nomadic practices of the Scythians such as transhumance. This horrified the English, firstly because it encouraged a wandering and therefore lawless lifestyle, and secondly it meant close contact between men and their beasts - it was believed that the Irish fed off the flesh and blood of their animals while they still lived. [35] Marlowe deliberately foregrounds images of flesh eating, particularly those with cannibalistic overtones, not only in this speech, but also throughout the play. [36] In Act IV, scene iv, Tamburlaine taunts the hungry Bajazeth, who replies, "I could willingly feed upon thy blood-raw heart" (IV.4.11-12), to which Tamburlaine replies, "Nay, thine own is easier to come by: pluck out that, and twill serve thee and thy wife" (IV.iv.13-14); Zabina then curses Tamburlaine and his guests, wishing them the same



fate as Philomela and Tereus, the king and queen of Thrace, who were tricked by Progne into eating their child Itys:

And may this banquet prove as ominous  
As Progne's to th'adulterous Thracian king  
That fed upon the substance of his child (IV.iv.23-25)

In the Diomedes speech in particular, Marlowe uses imagery of eating flesh and drinking wine evocative of the Catholic belief in transubstantiation, which sees the bread and wine as transformed during the mass into the body and blood of Christ, which is then consumed by the congregation. The cannibalistic aspect of this sacrificial ritual is brought sharply into focus at this time when considered alongside stories of the rituals of the Aztecs, for example, who carried out the same sacrifice albeit literally. Cannibalism was regarded as a sign of barbarity, the marker of an uncivilised people, but Marlowe is intent here on raising questions about the nature of Catholic ritual in the light of Western horror at and condemnation of Aztec practices. Stephen Greenblatt notes that whereas Protestant polemicists were quick to point to the parallels between Catholic and Indian practice, these similarities were blocked or suppressed by the Catholic missionaries and conquistadors who placed the emphasis firmly upon difference and revulsion. [37]

Tamburlaine's origins disrupt traditional values about what it means to be a Scythian, as they were regarded as barbarous and uncivilised, yet Tamburlaine displays numerous qualities that were admired by the Elizabethans. He certainly provides a successful and charismatic role-model. In this way Marlowe interrogates notions of difference and the relationship between Tamburlaine and the theatre audience is analogous to the position of the Spanish and English adventurers like Raleigh. There is a strong case for suggesting that Marlowe may have had Raleigh in mind when creating Tamburlaine. For example, the massacre of Babylon recalls Raleigh's involvement in the massacre at Smerwick in Ireland. One particularly telling

parallel between Raleigh and Tamburlaine is the Governor of Babylon's offer:

*But, Tamburlaine, in Limnasphaltis' lake  
There lies more gold than Babylon is worth,  
Which, when the city was besieg'd, I hid:  
Save but my life, and I will give it thee. (V.1.115-118)*

*Naturally such an offer cannot sway Tamburlaine; as the governor hangs from the city walls and is shot at, he responds,*

*No, though Asphaltis' lake were liquid gold,  
And offer'd me as ransom for thy life,  
Yet shouldst thou die. (V.1.154-156)*

The offer of a golden lake is reminiscent of Lake Paititi of El Dorado fame. For Tamburlaine, however, the lake holds little interest; he does not allow it to sway his judgement or distract him from capturing the city of Babylon. In this way he is the supreme model for New World conquest.

In *Midas* there is an insistence on the equivalence between gold and the lower bodily stratum. References to gold as "the guts of the earth" are repeated during the play. This strategy appears to undermine the Spanish reputation for imperial success and their ability to extract gold from the Americas. The connection between gold and the lower bodily stratum not only renders a national enemy with a reputation for machismo less threatening; it also reduces the desirability of their wealth. In Act III, scene I, Midas reflects, "Could not the treasure of Phrygia, nor the tributes of Greece, nor the mountains in the east, whose guts are gold, satisfy thy mind with gold?" (9-11). In the opening scene Eristus mocks the suggestion of the golden touch with "Gold is but the guts of the earth," to which Mellacrites retorts, "I had rather have the earth's guts than the moon's brains" (I.1.94-95).

A similar strategy was also employed against England's other national enemy, the Irish. In English Renaissance literature in particular, there is an



insistence on the association between the Irish and nakedness and embarrassing bodily functions, so that they are no longer perceived as threatening rebels, but as a nation of incontinents. Writers such as Spenser reinforced the belief that Irish men were naked beneath their mantles and Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* offers an analogy between Ireland and the body's private parts through the erotic blazon used by Dromio to describe Nell. [38] He says "she is spherical like a globe; I could find out countries in her" (III.ii.112). Antipholus asks "In what part of her body stands Ireland?"; Dromio replies, "Marry, sir, in her buttocks; I found it out by the bogs" (114-116). The pun on bog, the wet spongy earth associated with the Irish landscape, and the verb bog, "to exonerate the bowels," makes the association between Ireland and the lower body strata explicit. [39] Midas's attempts to conquer Lesbos make the same equivalence as he is compared to "a foolish gamester, [who] having a bagful of his own, ventures it all to win a groat of another" (IV.2.30-33). This description is suggestive of a passage in Stanyhurst's "Description of Ireland" in Holinshed about Irish gamesters: "There is among them [i.e., the "Wild Irish"] brotherhood of Karrowes, that profer to play at chartes all ye yere long, and make it their onely occupation. They play away mantle and all to the bare skin, and then trusse themselves in strawe or in leaues,.....For default of other stuffe, they paune theyr glibs [i.e., locks of hair on their foreheads], the nailes of their fingers and toes, their dimissaries [i.e., testicles], which they leese or redeeme at the curtesie of the wyinner." [40] The Irish gamester is prepared to risk literally everything he has, even his manhood, in this extreme display of machismo, and I would argue that Midas, in his quest for Lesbos, is shown to be equally foolish.

Gold is also described as a base material, drawing on contemporary alchemical ideas that base materials could be transformed into gold. In Act II, scene ii, the servant Licio describes it as "the earth's garbage, a weed bred by the sun, the very rubbish of barren earth" (II.ii.5-6). Later in the play, when Midas has been relieved of his golden touch but given ass's ears, Martius speculates as to why he has been given them: "It may be that



his wishing for gold, being but dross of the world, is by all the gods accounted foolish" (IV.iv.71-72). The relationship between gold and alchemy allows Lyly to suggest that the pursuit of gold is liable to make people behave foolishly and once again presents gold as a suspect substance.

Lyly also uses the play's subplot as a means of undermining the desirability not only of gold, but also of another golden myth, which was used as part of the legitimating discourse of empire. In the play's comic subplot Motto, Midas's barber, has been given his master's golden beard. The beard is stolen from Motto by Petulus, Mellacrites's servant, who subsequently suffers from toothache. In this way the subplot mirrors the action of the main play: just as Midas cannot eat when he achieves his wish, so Motto when he steals the golden beard cannot eat as he suffers from toothache. The subplot then follows Motto's quest to regain his golden beard. This comic story of the golden prosthetic beard is thus used not only to continue the association between gold and objects of ridicule but, I will argue, serves also as a parody of the myth of the Golden Fleece. The quest is no longer for a golden fleece but a golden beard. Motto the barber, having regained the golden beard, is forced to give it back to Petulus when he blackmails him, as he has revealed the secret of Midas's ass's ears.

During the Renaissance the story of Jason's voyage to Colchis to win the fleece gained renewed significance, as it was used not only as a trope to describe voyages to the New World, but more potently as the insignia of the Spanish Habsburgs. [41] In 1429 Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy, established the Order of the Golden Fleece primarily to promote chivalry and reinforce his political position. The Order was then passed down to the emperor Maximilian and then onto his grandson Charles V and in turn to his son Philip II of Spain. In this sense the fleece would have specific associations with the Habsburgs. There is a portrait of Maximilian and his family by Bernhard Striegel, painted c.1515, in which the dynastic claims of the Habsburgs are clearly displayed, as Maximilian and his grandsons Charles and Ferdinand are all shown wearing the chain of the Order of the Golden



Fleece with the golden ram clearly visible. [42] By the sixteenth century the significance of this iconography could not fail to encourage the insistent identification of the Argonauts with the Spanish and the fleece with gold from the New World. (The portrait can be viewed at <http://www.khm.at/homeE3.html>, following the links from the home page for Striegel). [43]

The story gradually developed to offer a more sinister interpretation of Jason's seizure of the fleece. In 1555 Georg Schuler in his commentary on Ovid's *Metamorphoses* describes how the story highlighted a greed for gold: "Which is why it is obvious that Jason obtained the treasure as a result of war... or brought war to Colchos because of his greed for gold; thus in our time the Spaniards who travelled to India for the same reason, that is, to bring



gold from hence." [44] So the myth of the fleece becomes associated not just with overseas conquest, but also more specifically with travel for the purposes of plundering. Marlowe in his handling of the myth in *Tamburlaine* uses it for precisely this purpose. In Part One, when Tamburlaine is about to seize the city of Damascus he reassures his men that the plunder it will offer will be as magnificent "As was to Jason Colchos' golden fleece" (IV.iv.9). [45] The comparison between the seizure of Damascus and the Golden Fleece highlights the way in which the fleece as the object of desire cannot satisfy the appetite it arouses. After Damascus, Tamburlaine moves on.

In *Midas*, Lyly seeks to undermine the force of this myth by parodying both the quest and its object, thus effectively ridiculing the Spanish and their gold. Motto, having been blackmailed by Petulus into giving up the beard, is forced to promise that he can "have the beard.....Not only the golden beard and every hair (though it be not hair), but a dozen of beards, to stuff two dozen of cushions" (V.ii.171-174). The comedy of this scene is further emphasized when the barber offers not only a golden beard, but also numerous other beards in order to secure the confidence of Petulus. Motto suggests that the beards should be used to stuff cushions. This advice is reminiscent of Valdes' lines in *Doctor Faustus* when he makes explicit use of the myth of the Golden Fleece to describe the gold that will be brought by spirits from the Americas:

From Venice shall they drag huge argosies, And from America the golden fleece. That yearly stuffs old Philip's treasury. [46]

In this instance the use of the verb "stuffs" emphasises the blasé attitude towards gold. Because of its availability there is casualness about obtaining it, suggesting that it is not as exclusive as "old Philip" might like to think. Lyly takes the deflation, not only of the value of gold but also of the myth itself, one stage further in his comic subplot by deliberately alluding to the image used in *Doctor Faustus*. In *Midas* it is a golden beard that is used to stuff a cushion, rather than a golden fleece that is used to stuff a treasury. This allusion reduces both the value of gold, by presenting it as a comic prosthesis, and the significance of



myth itself, which has been used symbolically to underpin Spanish imperial success.

Whilst *Midas* may have been written as part of the Armada celebrations in 1589, the play's primary concern is an interrogation of the basis for the festivities, namely England's triumph over imperial Spain. On the surface the allegory of king Midas as Philip of Spain appears to reinforce reassuring stereotypes, re-enacting the English victory over Spain. On closer examination the territories, which represent England and Spain, in the shape of Lesbos and Phrygia, actually begin to unravel English notions of self and empire, as Lyly seeks to expose the reality of the myth.

### Notes

1. David Bevington, "Lyly's *Endymion* and *Midas*: The Catholic Question in England," *Comparative Drama* 32 (1998): 26-46.
2. Bevington, "Lyly's *Endymion* and *Midas*," 37.
3. W. H. Rouse, ed, *Shakespeare's Ovid. Being Arthur Golding's Translation of the Metamorphoses* (London: Centaur Press, 1961), 220-221.
4. See Stephen S. Hilliard "Lyly's Midas as an Allegory of Tyranny." *Studies in English Literature* 12: (1972): 243-258.
5. See the dramatis personae in John Lyly, *Midas*, edited by George K. Hunter and David Bevington (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000), 150.
6. John Lyly, *Midas*, edited by Anne Begor Lancashire (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1969), I.1.41-42. All further quotations from the play will be taken from this edition and reference will be given in the text.
7. Bevington, "Lyly's *Endymion* and *Midas*," 38-39.
8. Simon Schama, *A History of Britain. At the Edge of the World? 3000 BC-AD 1603* (London: BBC Worldwide Ltd, 2000), 388.

9. See Leah S. Marcus, *Puzzling Shakespeare. Local Reading and Its Discontents* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1988), 53-66
10. John Lyly, *Sapho and Phao*, in *The Plays of John Lyly*, edited by Carter A. Daniel (London: Associated UP Inc., 1988), V.2.
11. Theodora A. Jankowski, "The Subversion of Flattery: The Queen's Body in John Lyly's *Sapho and Phao*," *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 5 (1991): 84 n. 19
12. Jankowski, "The Subversion of Flattery," 84 n. 19.
13. Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, Volume Two (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), 259-261.
14. William Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*, edited by David Bevington (Walton-on-Thames: Thomas Nelson & Sons Ltd, 1998), 130.
15. Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*, Prologue 7-8.
16. Margo Hendricks, "Managing the Barbarian: The Tragedy of *Dido, Queen of Carthage*," *Renaissance Drama* 2 (1992), 165-188.
17. Hendricks, "Managing the Barbarian," 165.
18. Frances A. Yates, *Astraea. The Imperial Theme in the Sixteenth Century* (Routledge: London, 1975), 112-120.
19. Yates, *Astraea*, 115.
20. See for example, Clifford Leech, "Marlowe's Humour," in *Marlowe: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Clifford Leech (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1964), 167-178.
21. See OED. My thanks to Ceri Sullivan for this suggestion.
22. See Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvellous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1991), 170 n.36. He notes the anecdote in which the Aztec king Montezuma asked Cortes why the strangers had such a desire for gold. Cortes told him that the Spaniards had a disease "about the heart, for which the only cure was gold."



**23.** Richard Hakluyt, *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation in Twelve Volumes* (Glasgow: James MacLehose & Sons, 1904), 276-277. See also Robert Ralston Cawley, *The Voyagers and Elizabethan Drama* (Boston: D.C. Heath & Co., 1938), 391, for another account of this story, together with its classical origins in the story of the Roman General Crassus, who suffered a similar fate.

**24.** Hakluyt, *Principal Navigations*, 276-7.

**25.** *The Engines of Our Ingenuity*. University of Houston. 26.07.2002. URL: <http://www.uh.edu/engines/epi893.htm>

**26.** Charles Nicholl, *The Creature in the Map* (London: Vintage, 1996), 12.

**27.** Nicholl, *Creature*, 12.

**28.** DNB.

**29.** Thomas Cartelli, "Marlowe and the New World," 112-113.

**30.** Michael Pincombe, *The Plays of John Lyly: Eros and Eli-za* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1996), xiii-xiv.

**31.** Cartelli, 113.

**32.** Christopher Marlowe, *Tamburlaine the Great Parts One & Two*, in *The Complete Plays*, ed. J.B Steane (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), I.1.6, 40, 43. All further quotations from the play will be taken from this edition and reference will be given in the text.

**33.** OED.

**34.** Fred B. Tromly, *Playing with Desire: Christopher Marlowe and the Art of Tantalization* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1998), 74-79.

**35.** Edmund Spenser, *A View of the State of Ireland*, ed. Andrew Hadfield and Willy Maley (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 55-56.

**36.** Tromly, *Playing with Desire*, 78.

**37.** Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*, 134-140.

38. William Shakespeare, *The Comedy of Errors*, ed R.A. Foakes (London: Methuen, 1963), III.2.112-116.

39. *OED*.

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